11*th December* 1809.

A

DESCRIPTION

OF THE

Curious Monuments and Antiquities

IN THE ISLAND OF

ICOLUMKILL.

Also, an Account of the Island of STAFFA, where the rural Throne of the late King Fingal is extant; being the Chief of the Heroes so much admired by the Poets.

By a Gentleman who made the Tour of Europe, prior to this Description, in a Letter to a Friend.—It is now published at the Desire of several Gentlemen of Distinction, who reside in the Country; and was given to the Bearer John M'Cormick, *upon account of his Misfortunes, to aid him in his Support.*

In the courſe of my eaſtern travels, many of the perſonages of diſtinction to whom I had the honour of being introduced, were as curious to be informed of the Caledonian antiquities, as I was to be initiated in their manners and cuſtoms, as well as to view their ſeveral different edifices, ſtructures, and monuments; which cannot but attract the attention of the curious, nay, even the ſentimental traveller.

The moſt of the perſonages, in the genteeleſt and moſt polite manner, ſhewed the utmoſt civility to me, my Go-

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vernor and Linguiſt: indeed the generoſity of many of them, inſpired them ſo much in our favour, that they not only perſonally attended us, in viewing the ancient ſtructures, ſculptures, cathedrals, &c. but endeavoured to give us the intention of their erection, and what was meant by the ſculptured figures on the monuments. In return of which favours, ſome of them requeſted that I would give them a deſcription of the above iſland, with the antiquities thereof, ſo much admired by foreigners, but I could not gratify them at the time: and therefore, at my return, I went with a few companions in a barge or long boat, from the iſland of Mull to the aforeſaid iſland, and took a ſhort view thereof, guided by an honeſt man who lives on the ſpot, and ſeems to have an hiſtorical account of the meaning or emblems of the remaining undefaced figures, in the various fabrics in the ſaid remote Iſland.

COLUMBA was a native of Ireland, deſcended from the royal family of that kingdom, and nearly allied to the kings of Scotland. Like many others who made a conſpicuous figure in the world, his birth is ſaid to have been preceded by ſome extraordinary circumſtances.—Maveth, the diſciple of St. Patrick, is ſaid to have predicted the name of Columba, and the laſting glory which he ſhould acquire by converting the Weſtern Iſles to Chriſtianity.

His mother, alſo, when with child of the Saint, dreamed one night that a perſon, whoſe figure and mien ſeemed to denote him to be more than human, had preſented her with a veil or garment of the most beautiful texture and colours; that in a little time, however, he reſumed his gift, and raiſing and expanding it in the ſky, allowed it to fly through heaven. As it flew, it continued to extend itſelf on all hands, over mountains and plains, till at length it covered an expanſe which her eye was not able to meaſure. Finding what ſhe once had poſſeſſed thus gone out of her reach, and likely to be irrecoverably loſt, ſhe could not help expreſſing her ſorrow and regret, till the angel thus addreſſed her: "Be not grieved at not being allowed to retain the "invaluable gift but a very ſhort time. It is an emblem of "that child of which thou art ſoon to be the mother: for "him hath God ordained, as one of his prophets, to be "extenſively uſeful upon earth, and to lead an innumerable "company of ſouls to heaven."

Columba was born in the year 521; and his parents being thus, as they believed, admoniſhed of the part which their ſon

was deſtined to act in life, and to which they ſoon perceived his genius and early diſpoſition to piety to be peculiarly adapted, loſt no time in providing him with ſuch education as tended to qualify him for the ſacred office. They firſt put him under the care of Cruinechan, a devout preſbyter, who diſcovered, as he thought, in his diſciple, while yet a child, extraordinary ſymptoms of his future glory and greatneſs.

Ireland had now for a long time enjoyed the ſweets of the goſpel, and abounded in ſaints and learned men, while the iſles and northern parts of Scotland were covered with darkneſs, and in the ſhackles of ſuperſtition. On thoſe diſmal regions, therefore, Columba looked with a pitying eye, and, however forbidding the proſpect, reſolved to become the apoſtle of the Highlands.—Accordingly, St. Columba, St. Oran, and St. Kenneth, three brothers, couſins to the king of Ireland, fitted out a veſſel called the Currachan, covered with cow-hides, and brought with them artificers of all kinds, neceſſary for erecting temples for our Saviour's worſhip, and committed themſelves to the direction of Heaven, for being landed in ſome colony or deſart, where they might exerciſe their religion without perſecution: conſequently, A. D. 565, they arrived in the Weſt end of the Iſland, at a harbour, called, after the veſſel, Port Currachan to this day. The length of the ſhip was ſixty-four feet, the breadth in proportion, and the dimenſions of the mould is hitherto preſerved in earth and ſtone. At the place of landing, there are ſeveral heaps of ſmall ſtones, of different bulks, within the ſea-mark—being a puniſhment inflicted by St. Columba upon his tranſgreſſing diſciples; and each heap was to be gathered in proportion to the ſins they committed; and their ſubmiſſion was received by their patron as a ſign of their penitence, and upon their confeſſion, kneeling before him, they received abſolution. There was lately found near this port, a large maſs of marble, interſperſed with ſuch a variety of colours, and is in quality ſo fine when poliſhed, as will, in beauty, and by its rarity, exceed the Italian and Venetian marble.

In ſaid year 565, St Columba, after conſecrating the burying-place with earth from Jeruſalem and Rome, erected the palace of St. Oran, which is ſaid to be the firſt cathedral in Scotland, erected for the worſhip of our Saviour. He alſo erected the magnificent and ſplendid church called St. Mary's: the remains of this building is a real imitation of the plan now extant of the temple of Jeruſalem. In a lane

or entry near the place of worſhip, is a building called the Place of Contemplation; and betwixt the ſaid place and the temple, is interred St. Columba: his monument is not now viſible. South from St. Oran's church, are buried forty-eight kings from different nations, with inſcriptions on their tombs in different languages, ſuch as Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Iriſh, &c. The arms of their kingdoms are beautifully engraven upon their tombs; and the moſt of them have the effigies of the monarchs drawn at full length, armed with ſwords, targets, and ſome with ſpears of an ancient conſtruction, engraven with admirable taſte. Alſo M'Donald, king of the Weſtern Iſles: the inſcription on his tomb cannot be read. It is ſaid, that 900 cows, at three merks Scots each, were conſumed at his burial.

Near the royal tombs, is interred the abbot M'Kinnon; with his effigy drawn at full length, with lions ſupporting his head and feet, a crook in his hand, as a ſhepherd over his flock, arrayed alſo in his altar-robes: he has a ſtar on the back of his left-hand, another on his breaſt, a ring on one of his fingers, directing two of his fingers to the ſtar, an angel on each ſide of his head, and another on the crown thereof: the inſcription on his tomb is in the Hebrew language, which was lately tranſlated into Engliſh by a viſiting gentleman: Here lies John M'Kinnon, late Abbot of Iona, who died in the year 1500. May the moſt high God have mercy on his ſoul!

Abbot M'Kenzie's effigy is drawn in the ſame manner: but the inſcription on his tomb, as well as on the tombs of other four Abbots, are ſo defaced that they cannot be read. There are alſo, in different places here, the tombs of the Highland Chieftains, the coats of arms of their families, and mottos, with their warlike apparelling, &c.: ſome inſcriptions are ſtill viſible and legible.—Here is alſo the tomb of Paul Campbell, treaſurer to the king of Scotland: he was ſon to the anceſtor of the family of Argyle: a large two-handed ſword, with the figure of the coins circulating at the time, are engraven upon the ſtone; but the inſcriptions thereon are quite defaced. Alſo the tomb of the famous Dr. Beaton: his elegy is viſible, and in the Engliſh language, below his armorial bearing, viz.

Behold, he falls by the dart of
iniquitous death,
who often delivered others from their complaints:
Glory be to God alone!

Within the Nunnery, on the ſouth-weſt of the village, are interred different Nuns. This building is a fine piece of architecture; and one tomb in particular cannot but attract the attention of the curious, viz. the tomb of the Lady Abbeſs: her effigy, in full length, is drawn in the moſt lively manner; ſhe is in a praying poſture, having uplifted hands, her eyes open, an angel on each ſide of her head playing on a harp, her lap-dog at the ſkirt of her garment, the moon above her head, and a comb for her hair. Fronting the Lady Abbeſs, on the ſame ſtone, is the Virgin Mary, with the Babe at the breaſt, a crown on his head, above which are the moon and ſtars; with the effigy of the Lady Abbeſs on the middle of the tomb, praying and ſaying, O holy Virgin, pray for me! The inſcription on the tomb is as follows:

Here lies the Mrs. Anna,
the daughter of Donald, ſon of Charles, late Abbess of Iona,
who died in the year 1540;
whose ſoul we commit to Abraham's bosom.

And the ſaid Nunnery is encircled with ſeveral cathedrals, monaſteries, and other edifices, built in the Gothic manner. There are many other tombs, with croſſes, in the iſland, having inſcriptions in different languages. The chief croſs, called St. Brandan's, is now the croſs at Campbeltown; and the bell of St. Mary's Chapel, is in one of the ſteeples of Glaſgow.

The following Figures are still visible in the Island.

Figure 1. The ſin of Ingratitude, repreſented by three ruffian-brethren robbing their nurſe of a cow, one holding the cow by the horns, the ſecond by the tail, the third attempting to kill her, and the woman behind, with open mouth and uplifted hands, appealing to Heaven for protection.

Figure 2. Upon the right ſide of the Place of Contemplation, is the figure of an Archangel, with beam and balance, weighing the ſouls of men; the devil crouching behind to catch either beam or balance, if found wanting in their ſeparate functions.

Figure 3. Our firſt parents, Adam and Eve, in the garden of Eden, ſtanding on oppoſite ſides of the tree of knowledge, having aprons of leaves, and hands acroſs, covering their nakedneſs; the Archangel, with a ſword in his hand, turning them out of the garden, and threatening deſtruction; the promiſed Saviour appearing for their preſervation, and bruiſing the head of the ſerpent.

Figure 4. Our Saviour riding to Jeruſalem upon an aſs, and a great multitude following him, praying for his bleſſing.

Figure 5. The band of ſoldiers apprehending our Saviour, and Peter cutting off Malcheus' ear.

Figure 6. Samſon killing the lion.

Figure 7. John the Baptiſt beheaded, his wounds guſhing with blood, the executioner holding the head in his hand, the daughter of Herodias receiving it from the executioner, and John lying on the ground beheaded.

Figure 8. It is a croſs lately found below the ground near the Nunnery, upon which is engraven very naturally, our Saviour crucified, in the very manner deſcribed in the ſcripture; and is fixed in a ſtanding poſture near the Nunnery.

There were many ſtreets and walks leading to the weſt of the village: the chief ſtreet was called the King's Street. About the whole fabrics there was a freſh lake, ſurrounded with a fine grove of birch-wood, which made the place very agreeable.

In the middle of the iſland are two hills; the one is called Angel-hill; there being the remains of a place of worſhip to be ſeen on the top of each of them. It is ſaid that at Whitſunday, the prieſts rode on white horſes, clothed in white robes, to the ſaid places of worſhip.

The iſland is about three miles in length, and one in breadth, and is very fertile in grain and graſs; and in property belongs to the Duke of Argyle: there are 460 people reſiding therein.

The inhabitants buried their Males ſeparate from their Females, till within theſe forty years paſt.

Tradition ſays, that Chomanus was ſent from the monaſtery of Icolumkill, by Columba, to plant the goſpel in Iſlay, and being buried in this place, gave name to the pariſh of Keil-Choman. It is ſituated in the iſland of Iſlay, is 20 miles long, and 6 broad, and is of a peninſular form; as Lochgrunart and Lochindale, two arms of the ſea, cut deep into the country.

The moſt remarkable event of Keil-Choman, is the battle fought between the M'Donolds and the M'Leans, in 1588. M'Lean being married to M'Donald's daughter, was to have part of Iſlay as her portion; but the treaty not being implemented, he came from Mull with 1400 of his clan, to force M'Donald to a compliance. M'Donald, with 1000 of his tribe, gave him battle, and deſtroyed the flower of his army.

M'Lean himſelf was killed with an arrow, and lies interred in the kirk of Kilchoman. A ſavage courtſhip indeed! but ſuch were the times! It is not certain how long the M'Donalds maintained their dominion in Iſlay, and other places, after that era; but ſure it is, that, by their reſtleſs diſpoſition, they at laſt forfeited them.

Character of the Inhabitants, &c.—The people, in general, are ſober, induſtrious, humane, and ready enough to follow any branch of buſineſs that they ſee clearly is for their advantage. The ground they have to labour, and the method of labouring, ſhow their induſtry and perſeverance. The number of poor they ſupport, ſhows their humanity; as alſo two ſhipwrecks that happened within theſe few years. In both inſtances, the poor ſailors were treated with kindneſs and humanity. One of theſe veſſels was wrecked in Roſs; and it is very remarkable, that a quantity of cork, very uſeful, and much wanted in the country for their nets, ſcattered over a ſtrand of upwards of a mile in extent, was not touched by the inhabitants, though many were too poor to buy it, even if they had an opportunity. They are by no means ſuperſtitious; yet they ſtill retain ſome opinions handed down by their anceſtors, perhaps from the times of the Druids. It is believed by them, that the ſpirit of the laſt perſon that was buried, watches round the church-yard till another is buried, to whom he delivers his charge. A man in Icolumkill, of the name of Mr. M'Innis, touches for the King's evil. He is the ſeventh ſon; and it is firmly believed in the country, that he has this gift of curing. He touches or rubs over the ſore with his hand, two Thurſdays and two Sundays ſucceſſively, in the name of the Trinity, and ſays, "It is God that cures." He aſks nothing for his trouble. It is believed, if he did, there would be no cure. He is often ſent for out of the country; and though he aſks nothing, yet the patients, or their friends, make him preſents. He is perfectly illiterate; and ſays, he does not know how the cure is effected, but that God is pleaſed to work it in conſequence of his touch.

Such has been the general good behaviour of the inhabitants, that none have ſuffered capital puniſhment in the memory of any perſon living.

ACCOUNT

OF THE

ISLAND OF STAFFA.

THREE leagues north from Icolumkill, is the famous iſland of Staffa. It is ſupported upon pillars in the middle of the ocean: the pillars are of a mixed marble; and no marble containing ſuch a variety of mixed colours was ever diſcovered in Britain. The iſland is ſquare, and extends about three quarters of a mile: the ſubterraneous part thereof is ſo naturally arched and decorated, that it exceeds the moſt exquiſite performance of the greateſt artiſts in the world. There is a melodious cave in the iſland: any muſic played or ſung therein, will in reality have a ſound more melodious than an organ. The rocks towards the ſea ſeem as if they were poliſhed by artiſts of great taſte: the pebbles on the ſhore have every appearance of beautiful pearls.—There is only one family in the iſland. In ſtormy weather, their houſe not only ſhakes, but even the very kettles on the fire.—There is further a greater curioſity: A barge under ſails, and at low water, will with eaſe proceed ſixty yards into the ſaid cave; and at the diſtance of a league, when paſſing the ſame in dark nights, a viſible ſparkling like diamonds, will caſt a luſtre at a great diſtance. On the top of the iſland there is a beautiful natural ſeat of marble, reſembling an eaſy chair, which is ſaid to be king Fingal's throne; and contiguous thereto, there are three pyramids reſembling ſugar-loaves, which beautifies the royal ſeat.

About 50 leagues ſouth-eaſt from Staffa, lie the remains of a moſt ancient cathedral: it was erected by one of the kings of Ireland, who, for his piety and diſtinguiſhed zeal in propagating the Chriſtian religion, acquired the name of St. Cormaig.

All the colonies of the Highlands came moſtly from Ireland, *viz.* the M'Donalds, M'Dougalds, M'Leans, M'Lachlans, M'Carbries, M'Neils, M'O'Sheunugs, M'Mhicuhs, &c.:—the M'Leods, M'Fees, M'Corguidals, M'Callums, from Denmark:—the M'Kenzies, Frazers, and Gordons, from France:—the Campbells from Spain.—The firſt religion in Scotland was called Druidiſm; in Erſe, Druinich. They worſhipped the ſun, till Columba came from Ireland, who was a diſciple of John the Apoſtle; and the preachers were called, Culdich, *i. e. Cultores Dei*, Worſhippers of God.

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